

Mindfulness Beyond Meditation

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I was recently at a great conference on mindfulness in the business environment, and a lot of good things were said about the necessity for business leaders to be more mindful in the workplace and to encourage their teams along the same lines. One thing that struck me, however, was the narrow view of mindfulness that many of the attendees and, indeed, the speakers had. The common refrain went something like this: “I regularly practice mindfulness. I’ve been meditating for 20 years.” If a pie graph on mindfulness were created, a small slice of that pie would be called Reflective Practice. A sub-slice of Reflective Practice might be called Meditation. Consequently, meditation is a small slice of a small slice in the mindfulness pie, but there didn’t seem to be much awareness of this in the conversations I had. So, what else is out there on mindfulness above and beyond the practice of meditation?

In the 1960s, a psychologist named Walter Mischel ran an interesting study with young children (aged 4-6). He sat them down in a classroom and put a marshmallow in front of each of them. He told them they could eat the marshmallow at any time, but he was going to leave the room for 15 minutes. If they could wait to eat the marshmallow until he returned, they would receive another one. He left the room and returned in 15 minutes, to find that some of the children had eaten their marshmallows. As promised, he gave another marshmallow to the children who waited for his return. Interestingly, Mischel followed these students for five decades, and documented that the children who waited showed better brain executive function, did better in school, were happier, had better health, earned more money, and were more satisfied with their relationships. Not surprisingly, they also avoided more negative outcomes, in that they had fewer substance abuse problems, had lower rates of obesity, and were less likely to have a criminal record. What Mischel found as the difference between these two groups of children was the ability to delay gratification.

There are three main takeaways from this study to understand a more complete picture of mindfulness other than just meditation:

1. **Mindfulness focuses on the long-term:** People who don’t delay gratification do so because they love the short-term gain associated with getting what they want right now. However, that always comes with a long-term cost that is greater than the short-term gain. Those who can suffer a short-term loss often capitalize on a much greater long-term gain.

2. **Mindfulness is intentional:** Mindful people act in a way consistent with their values and goals and do so with strong appeal to reason. Those who are less mindful are driven more by emotion and impulse and may have a difficult time logically explaining their behavior.
3. **Mindfulness looks at the 'why', not the 'why not':** You may have heard an exchange like this before between a parent and a teenager – Parent: “Why are you on your phone so much?” Teenager: “Why not?” The ‘why not’ response is basically saying that as long as there aren’t any obvious issues with what I’m doing, then I should engage in this behavior. That keeps the tipping-point threshold pretty low for deciding in favor of the behavior. On the other hand, asking ‘why’ requires us to raise the bar, focusing us more on healthy options, rather than the more neutral (or even slightly negative) options we might otherwise engage in from the ‘why not’ perspective.

There are many ways to be mindful, and consistently engaging in reflective practice (of which meditation is one) is an important part of this discipline. However, it is vital to understand that viewing Mindfulness primarily through the lens of meditation restricts our view of this complex and rich topic. What are you doing to practice mindfulness beyond meditation? Please let us know on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), and share this post with others who might find it helpful. Get the printer friendly version of this post [here](#).